



# TARGETING EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

## Relevant Conspiracy Theories in Sweden National Report



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## Consortium



Leibniz  
Universität  
Hannover



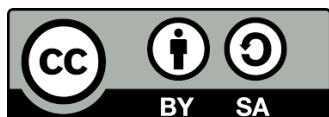
Institut für  
Didaktik der  
Demokratie



Folkuniversitetet



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## 1. Definition

The existence and dispersion of conspiracy theories is not a new phenomenon in our societies. However, during the last two decades there has been a wide increase in the spread of conspiracy theories due to digitalisation and the Internet (Werne, 2018). Today conspiracy theories can easily spread fast and wide to millions of people. The easy access to material and channels that connect like-minded conspiracy theorists enables communities to form where people can inspire, validate and consolidate each other's views on conspiracy theories (Werne, 2018). The Swedish professor emeritus Erik Åsard (2015) highlights the importance of making a distinction between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory. The first is the action that involves a treacherous plan, that has been proven, conducted in secret with at least two people whereas a conspiracy theory is a conviction that expresses concern for an assumed but not yet proven conspiracy. According to Kent Werne (2018) a conspiracy theory is the conviction that a secret group, that holds some kind of power is behind certain events. Krouwel et al. (2017) uses a similar definition and describes conspiracy theories as such: "we define conspiracy theories as suspicions that a group of individuals are involved in secret agreement, attempting to achieve hidden goals which are generally regarded as unlawful or malevolent. In most cases, such conspiracies are considered as a plot of either powerful groups or minorities" (Krouwel et al., 2017: 5).

Conspiracy theories are built on selective evidence which allows people to choose material and sources that validates the conspiracy theory and reject everything that disproves it as part of the conspirator's plan. Douglas et al. (2019) emphasises the terms "conspiracy thinking" and "conspiracy mindset" which means that people who already believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others even if they are completely unrelated. This means that people who believe in seemingly harmless conspiracy theories are more likely to also believe in more harmful conspiracy theories. Moreover, Krouwel et al. (2017) discuss that people with more extreme political opinions have a higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories than people with moderate



political opinions. Krouwel et al. further highlight the issue that political extremists tend to only receive and believe in information about socio-political issues that are provided by other extremists.

## 2. Prevalent conspiracy theories in Sweden

### 2.1 Scientific discourse

There are no statistical data on which conspiracy theories are most prevalent in Sweden today. Nonetheless, the spread of local and international conspiracy theories has become a popular research topic in both Sweden and beyond. Conspiracy theories ranging from Chemtrails polluting the earth through airplanes to lizards governing the world are being researched. However, the focus of this chapter is on prevalent extremist conspiracy theories in Sweden. Therefore, the conspiracy theories discussed here will focus on those including extremist political opinions, racist notions and other hate related subjects.

A negative trend noticeable throughout all of Europe the last ten years is the spread of Islamophobic ideas. This spread has resulted in many European countries, including Sweden, now having parties in the parliament representing far-right political ideas (Gardell, 2011). Krouwel et al. (2017) discuss the results of their quantitative research on conspiracy theories in Sweden, which shows that people with extreme political opinions, both to the right and left, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories compared to people who have more moderate political opinions. The authors furthermore state that extreme political beliefs and conspiracy theories are subjected to similar underlying motivations which are to find causal explanations to complex and distressing social events. Another factor that Krouwel et al. highlights is economic status. Their results show that people who sympathize with extreme political opinions and have a higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories also in general have worse economic conditions than political moderates (Krouwel et al., 2017).

With the growing number of people sympathizing with far-right and anti-Muslim political opinions in Sweden the conspiracy theory known as “Eurabia” has won ground (Gardell, 2011). In this conspiracy theory people believe in a conspiracy between European and Arabic leaders to weaken Europe. This by the spread of “disinformation”, large immigration of Muslims to Europe and the spread of collaborators around Europe working for the conspiracy with the final goal of taking over the entire world under Islamic rule (Gardell, 2011). People believing in Eurabia is most prevalent in far-right anti-Muslim organizations in Europe. In Sweden the far-right political party Sverigedemokraterna (SD) that currently holds 17.5% of the mandate in the parliament have high ranking party members that openly supports and believe in Eurabia (Gardell, 2011, Werne, 2018). The Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik who killed 77 and injured 42 young socialist party members in Norway was also a firm believer in the Eurabia conspiracy theory (Werne, 2018).

The Jewish people has been persecuted throughout the entire written history of Europe. Within this long history innumerable anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have circulated (Gardell, 2011). The prevalence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories is still a large issue today. In Sweden, conspiracy theories range from claims that Jews control the world by owning and controlling banks and media (for example the Rothschild family, and in Sweden the Bonnier family) to people denying the Holocaust. (Werne, 2018, Tossavainen, 2003).

A growing issue in Sweden is the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories within the Muslim and Arabic community (Tossavainen, 2003). In his report on anti-Semitism among the Arabic and Muslim community in Sweden Mikael Tossavainen argues that anti-Semitic traditions linger among Arabic and Muslim immigrants throughout all of Europe especially in segregated suburbs to larger cities (Tossavainen, 2003). This issue has according to Tossavainen not been brought to attention, resulting in a lack of knowledge in how the situation has developed.

### 2.2 Discourses within (social) media

As previously mentioned with the arrival of the Internet the spread of conspiracy theories and alternative media has grown to become a large network with many actors contributing (Werne, 2018). In Sweden Mikael Cromsjö was one of the pioneers in creating a large online forum for conspiracy theories called Vaken.se. It started out as a small community of people who had to connect via modem and call Cromsjö to get the information he was spreading (Werne, 2018). Around 2005 Vaken.se had grown to become one of Sweden's largest forum on conspiracy theories and alternative information. Along with Cromsjö's forum other similar channels exist. The by far largest anonymous online community and forum for alternative information, that is still the largest today is Flashback.org. The forum's section for conspiracy theories has over 500 000 posts and around 4500 different topics. On these forums people discuss conspiracy theories about the NWO<sup>1</sup>, mass vaccinations, chemtrails, microchipping, Illuminati and false flag operations, just to mention a few. The murder of Olof Palme has for a long time been the most widespread topic of conspiracy theories in Sweden according to Kent Werne (2018). Although he highlights how this conspiracy theory and other "classical Swedish" conspiracy theories are being pushed aside for topics surrounding systemic conspiracy theories where it is believed that global networks dominate the world. The Internet has enabled Swedish conspiracy theorists to access information about Anglo-American conspiracy theories that have become the most widespread theories on the forums today, where 9/11 receives most attention (Werne, 2018).

Around the 2000s forums and later on blog posts were the dominating ways for conspiracy theorists to connect, discuss, spread and exchange information. With the arrival of Facebook these channels would soon be obsolete (Werne, 2018). Vaken.se was active for ten years and contains over 200 000 blog posts but with Facebook's arrival it was abandoned and the discussions have now been moved over to a Facebook group under the same name. Another popular forum, Blueshift.nu, saw a revival in May 2019

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<sup>1</sup>The new world order

and is posting conspiracy theories surrounding the holocaust (mostly denying the holocaust) and Sweden's way into a global dictatorship. Moreover, the blueshift group posts blogs on a wide variety of conspiracy theories ranging from topics about Donald Trump to the Eurovision song-contest. The forum's description of themselves follows: "Between 2010 and 2018, Blueshift was one of Sweden's most visited activist portals – created as a counter-force to a faceless international financial elite's plans to incorporate Scandinavia into a global dictatorship on the ruins of a desolate planet" (Blueshift.nu).

Conspiracy theories frequently discussed on Flashback.org, Blueshift.nu and Vaken.se are often related to what is perceived as the Swedish politician's failures in handling immigration, crime and terrorism. Some examples of conspiracies that are being spread are:

- The downplaying by the government of crime and terrorism conducted by immigrants which is believed to be much worse than is reported by mainstream media.
- The terrorist bombing in Stockholm 2017 was a false flag operation.
- Immigration: the socialist party wants to have a large immigration to "import" votes for the party.
- The liberals want to have a large immigration to be able to lower wages.
- The political leaders want to exterminate "the white race" and create a multicultural society with only "mixed race".
- The decay of Sweden through high immigration, unravelling of gender norms and Sweden being part of a global dictatorship.
- Denial of the environmental crisis and questioning if Greta Thunberg is part of a conspiracy. The newest addition to the conspiracy is that she is a time traveller with the proof coming from a picture of a girl from 1898 that looks exactly like Greta.



Finding information online that stems from conspiracy theories and alternative media is an easy task. Facebook, forums, blogs, YouTube and podcasts are easy to access by the curious. This development contains a danger. According to Michael Barkun (2016) conspiracy theories can be seen as “stigmatized knowledge” which is knowledge that has not been accepted by institutions that generally are relied upon for validation. With the spread and distribution online, the linkage between conspiracy theories as stigmatized knowledge weakens. What was before isolated coterie has now the potential to make the leap into public discourse (Barkun, 2016). He argues, firstly, that the easy access to the Internet and social media “provided a powerful alternative to the existing complex of newspapers, television, and periodicals. Second, it allowed individuals to create media platforms with virtually no capital investment. Third, it eliminated the gatekeepers who had traditionally filtered content” (Barkun 2016: 3). Resulting in alternative online media which allows for individuals without any capital investment to create and spread information without the content being validated or filtered by traditional media or institutions.

### 3. Prevalent conspiracy theories in adult education

As a complementary research adult educators within Folkuniversitetet was asked about the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the classroom. Folkuniversitetet offers education within secondary school, adult education and vocational education in a wide variety of subjects. To get a comprehensive view of the situation informal interviews have been conducted with educators teaching different subject and for different age groups about their experiences with conspiracy theories. The first interview was conducted with two teachers (EF1S and IF2S) at the secondary school for nursing. They could not remember any instances where students had brought up conspiracy theories in the classroom. EF1S pointed out that there might have been some discussions taken place about conspiracy theories but these were more general and never in the sense that students brought up conspiracy theories they believed in. IF2S had never had any experiences with conspiracy theories in the classroom. However, she did admit that she felt a bit sceptical towards the government in relation to how they are handling the Corona-virus and thought that there might be a conspiracy behind it.

Similar results were noticed when interviewing an adult educator (AM3S) who teaches creative writing and a religion teacher (EF4S) at secondary school level. Neither one had experienced any encounters with students bringing up conspiracy theories in the classroom. However, a teacher (EF5S) at secondary level teaching social science, religion, ethics and history had come across quite a few different discussions about conspiracy theories. These were mostly brought up by students who had encountered “new evidence” online and started to question the official version. The conspiracy theories that had been brought up most frequent are: the moon landing was fake and 9/11 was an insider job. The teacher also mentioned that conspiracy theories about Bin Ladin’s death, the pyramids not being built by humans and flat earth had been brought up in the classroom.

### 4. Summary

- A conspiracy theory is a suspicion that a group of individuals in secret agreement, attempts to achieve hidden goals regarded as unlawful or malevolent. Such conspiracies are usually considered as a plot of either powerful groups or minorities.
- There is a tendency to “conspiracy thinking”, people that already believe in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others even if they are completely unrelated.
- People with more extreme political opinions have a higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.
- Islamophobic ideas and far-right extreme political opinions have increased throughout Europe and Sweden and with these the Eurabia conspiracy theory has won ground. It is even represented in the Swedish parliament.
- Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are still prevalent in the Swedish discourse and have seen a rise within the Arabic and Muslim communities mainly in segregated suburbs to larger cities.
- Conspiracy theories thrive on the Internet and social media is functioning as a vessel to bring conspiracy theories into the public discourse.
- Facebook groups, Online forums and blogs like Vaken.se, Blueshift.nu and Flashback.org are part of the creation of alternative information by spreading and validating conspiracy theories.
- The conspiracy theory receiving most attention online is regarding the murder of the former prime minister Olof Palme. But there is a gradual focus shift towards Anglo-American global systemic conspiracy theories.
- Conspiracy theories spread online in the Swedish context are often related to what is perceived as the Swedish politicians’ failures in handling immigration, crime and terrorism.

- The majority of teacher's interviewed had never encountered conspiracy theories in the classroom. The only teacher that had faced conspiracy theories mentioned "the moon landing is fake" and "9/11 was an insider job" and the conspiracy theories that was brought up most times.

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